

Review/Music; John Zorn and 'Cobra'

Allan Kozinn

3-4 minutes

[Arts](#) | Review/Music; John Zorn and 'Cobra'

<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/09/03/arts/review-music-john-zorn-and-cobra.html>

- Sept. 3, 1989

Credit...The New York Times Archives

See the article in its original context from
September 3, 1989, Section 1, Page 68 [Buy Reprints](#)

TimesMachine is an exclusive benefit for home delivery and digital subscribers.

About the Archive

This is a digitized version of an article from The Times's print archive, before the start of online publication in 1996. To preserve these articles as they originally appeared, The Times does not alter, edit or update them.

Occasionally the digitization process introduces transcription errors or other problems; we are continuing to work to improve these archived versions.

Watching John Zorn conduct a performance of his "Cobra" at P.S. 122 on Friday evening, one was put in mind of a precocious brat let loose in a room full of fancy sound equipment, with a gang of his friends willing to follow his whims.

Like many of Mr. Zorn's works, "Cobra" (first performed in 1984) is a semi-improvisatory piece that draws its structure and substance from an elaborate set of rules rather than from a score. To direct the work, Mr. Zorn held up cards bearing symbols. What was performed was a function not only of the symbol, but also of how high Mr. Zorn held it, how quickly he lowered it, and whether he was wearing his baseball cap.

Mr. Zorn's 11 players also had a say in the work's direction. They raised their hands in the hope that Mr. Zorn would cue them for brief solos, and when chosen, they often pointed to other ensemble members, with whom they shared their solo moments in duo and trio configurations.

At times the work sounded like musique concrete, with disparate

sonic elements flying past in quick bursts. The band - which included electric guitars, electric violins, synthesizers, and a pair of turntables on which disks were manipulated to produce odd textures - veered from free-form jazz to fleeting patches of energetic rock-and-roll to bits of classical and folk fiddling.

There were generic pop references (piano figures common to 1950's rockers) and specific ones (the guitar riff from the Beatles' "I Feel Fine" made a few appearances), and there were barrages of dense, abrasive noise and air-raid-siren wailing.

At times, movements droned on too long, and there were self-indulgent moments. But the work's saving grace was the underlying humor implicit in its governing rules and tangible in the often cartoonish playing.

A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 3, 1989, Section 1, Page 68 of the National edition with the headline: Review/Music; John Zorn and 'Cobra'. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)